The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE HEALING CONNECTION

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Isaiah 55:1-5 Luke 4:38-41

"As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick ... brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them." Luke 4:40 (NRSV)

Bill Moyers begins one of the chapters in his fine book, *Healing and the Mind*, with a quotation:

> "Nothing so concentrates experience and clarifies the central conditions of living as serious illness."

Sooner or later you and I have a personal encounter with serious illness:

● a friend calls to report that another friend of many years is in the hospital, fighting what will be his last battle with AIDS. You think about what to do, and what not to do, and finally decide to call. His voice is so weak it's barely recognizable. His ex-wife, his grown son and daughter, his partner are with him. After the awkward opening pleasantries you have to carry the conversation, so you try to say "I'm with you, I care about you, I pray for you, I will not forget you." And then you sit quietly and think about your own life for a long time afterward.

● a valued colleague calls, needs advice. The doctor says her cancer has metastasized; chemotherapy, which is making her dreadfully ill, isn't working. Should she just quit and try to live as fully as possible for whatever time is left?

● over dinner, your table partner mentions in passing that his mother has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; his 85-year-old father doesn't know what he'll do.

> "Nothing so concentrates experience and clarifies the central conditions of living as a serious illness."

It's true, of course. For a few decades at the most, serious illness is an abstraction; something that happens to other people or vicariously on *ER*, the latest in our culture's long series of medical dramas. But sooner or later it comes close. Your relatives, your parents, your colleagues and friends. It is, in a sense, never expected. And part of what is so surprising about it when it happens, is how utterly unprepared we are, how shocked, stunned, angered even that our neat, organized lives are suddenly out of our control. Someone, something else, is in charge: the illness, the pain, the incapacity has become the organizing principle around which we arrange life — or the doctors, the hospital, the insurance company, the health care system.

Kenneth Vaux, a Presbyterian theologian who is one of the academic authorities on issues of faith and health, and who teaches at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, writes that the modern attitude about health, a new phenomenon in human history, is that health is something we can achieve by hard work, obeying the rules, doing all the right things, and that health is a basic right which the government, the system, the medical profession, the society should provide.

And so we spend an enormous amount of money and seem generally not very happy with our purchase. The late Norman Cousins wrote a few books about his two encounters with life-threatening illness. In an interview before he died he said:

> "We have become a self-medicating society, using aspirin, Tylenol, Advil, all the others. We almost feel subversive or un-American unless we douse ourselves with these things. So we've become a nation of hypochondriacs, and doctors' offices are clogged with people who have no business being there."

Cousins was just acerbic enough to put in print what I am led to believe every doctor knows, namely, that 85% of all illness is self-limiting, i.e. if you do nothing, the body will take care of itself. I wish to be clear, however, that I am in the other 15%. When I go to the doctor's office it is a very serious matter. My life may be in imminent danger. I need the best attention the society can give me, and I don't want to sit for two hours reading old *People* magazines waiting for it!

It is a topic we preachers approach with caution, and for good reason. The relationship of faith and health, healing as a function of religion, has a somewhat checkered past in this culture. Television faith healers are regularly exposed as manipulators and charlatans. And, sadly, everyone of us knows someone who, in the middle of critical illness, flew off to Mexico for a miracle cure, or who invested heavily in nutritional supplements, marginal drug therapy — because at the time it seemed like doing something, anything, was better than acquiescing to the disease's progress. The medical profession has rightly viewed religionists with some suspicion. But today there is a whole new conversation going on about healing and what role the human spirit plays in it. Starting with Granger Westberg, a professor at the University of Chicago who taught both in the Medical and Divinity School in the 60s, there has been an ongoing dialogue about faith and health that is provocative and very important.

It is, of course, not possible to read much of the Bible, particularly the life and ministry of Jesus, without encountering it.

There is a lively contemporary literature on the subject of faith and health. The late Norman Cousins, distinguished editor of *Saturday Review*, wrote about his experience with critical illness and an unusual therapy he designed for himself in consultation with his doctor. Cousins focused carefully on medicine, diet and personal attitude. In a now famous article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* — which he turned into a bestselling book, *The Anatomy of an Illness* — Cousins tells how laughter brought him blessed relief from relentless pain and, he is convinced, healing. Bill Moyers turned his wonderful PBS series into a book, *Healing and the Mind.*

There are, in addition, three current books which are thoughtful and personal reflections.

- *Intoxicated by My Illness* by literary critic Anatole Broyard;
- *Cancer and Faith: Reflections on Living With Terminal Illness*, by a theologian, John Carmody;
- *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing* by one of our most distinguished working novelists, Reynolds Price.

Broyard and Carmody have died since their books were published. Reynolds Price is very much alive ten years after his encounter with a very serious malignancy of the spine, writing, teaching at Duke University, although confined to a wheelchair.

One day when he was 51, healthy, at the top of his career as a novelist, poet, professor, Price experienced numbness in his leg and a slight loss of motor control. As the symptoms continued, he went to a doctor and then began a ten-year journey including multiple surgeries on his spine, radiation and chemotherapy which while battling the tumor also contributed to the incredible, uninterrupted pain he endured and his eventual paralysis. He was in and out of the hospital and for a long period of time, his prognosis was very grim.

Reynolds Price describes what he learned about himself and about life during his illness. Time, in the middle of pain, becomes terribly focused. Seconds become minutes, minutes seem like hours. And at the other end, when pain subsides, time becomes incredibly precious.

> "Books, food, music, friends, trees, the first light of a new day — assume the form of sacraments."
> [See Thomas G. Long, *Theology Today*, January, 1995]

Broyard wrote:

> "When my wife made me a hamburger the other day, I thought it was the most fabulous hamburger in the history of the world."

And John Carmody:

> "When you are terribly ill, the morning star is precious." [see Thomas G. Long, *Theology Today*, January, 1995, p. 492]

Reynolds Price is most eloquent when he talks about the human dimension, the relational aspect of his experience with illness and healing. I found it particularly interesting because all of us, even ministers, wonder sometimes whether we should "bother" a critically ill person with a visit or a telephone call. Let me say it here: never decide not to reach out to someone who is critically ill out of concern that your gesture will be a nuisance or a bother. If it is, the sick person will let you know. But the odds are enormous that your concern will be gratefully experienced and received. Price and others think it has therapeutic value. You don't have to be an expert. There are no pat prescribed things to say. What is required is compassion, concern, the physical touch of a hand, a stammered "I'm with you; I'm praying for you" is just fine. And one more word while we're on the subject. There is no more distressing sentence to a minister than this: "I was in the hospital — my wife/husband/son/daughter had surgery recently — I thought about calling you but you're so busy." We hear that a lot. We hear a lot about serious illness and hospitalization after the fact.

In the smaller congregations or smaller cities and towns where most of us once lived it didn't happen that way. Everybody knew when a member of the church was in the hospital. In one community I had a member in the admissions department who called my office every time a Presbyterian checked in. In my first church the congregation and community and hospital were all small enough that I could stop by every day and read the list of admissions.

None of that happens in Chicago. We hear a lot about illness after the fact. We depend on you. Maybe you don't want a minister to call. We promise not to stay long, or speak in tongues or try to convert your agnostic sister-in-law. Please call us. Please call us and tell us about others who probably won't be calling us.

Reynolds Price let his friends know what was happening to him and they wrote and telephoned and came to him. He reflects:

> "I thought I could sense their hope like a firm wind at my back. It felt like the pressure of transmitted courage sent from as far off as Britain and Africa; and that was the thing I most needed now — that and the effort to string a usable line of communication with what I call God." [p. 22]

Price writes that contact with human beings was life-giving, life-supporting and healing. He describes his hunger for "the oldest natural code of all — mere human connection, the simple looks and words that award a suffering creature his or her dignity."

He didn't always get it from doctors. He is tough in his book on his "frozen" oncologist — a man who never once expressed concern, looked the other way when Price tried to start conversations.

"A physician who saw me as seldom as he could manage." Price says we should expect from physicians simple humanness, no excuses that doctors can't get involved emotionally, In fact, Price argues, and many physicians agree, that to objectify a patient, or worse — to subdivide the patient into parts: body, mind and soul — the doctor was in charge of body and, therefore with no obligation to mind and spirit — is to do harm, not good. We can expect "basic human sympathy, the skills for letting another creature know that his or her concern is honored and valued."

Reynolds Price also describes the spiritual dimension ... the need to

> "string a usable line of communications with what I call God." In pre-dawn hours during the time of most intense pain he would, he writes, "lie alone in my bed in the dark and sense the presence, just to the right of my mind's eye, of a patient listener." [p. 54]

Throughout, the writer knows somehow that he is not alone, and that whatever happens to him, God, or what he calls God, is present.

On a particularly difficult day he asks for communion. He had been raised a Methodist and so a local Methodist minister was called.

> "He came to my bedroom on a clear hot morning: I sat on my chair, no one else near. He read the words from the Gospel of Mark — 'This is my body, this is my blood, do this in memory of me.' Then he fed me communion ... as intensely as any mystic, in the slow eating that one morning, I experienced again the almost overwhelming force which has always felt to me like God's presence." [p. 81-82].

At the very beginning of his public ministry in what the Gospel writer describes as the first full day of intentional activity, representing now God's kingdom on earth, something powerful and moving and lovely starts to happen. As the sun sets, marking the end of the Sabbath, the people of the little village of Capernaum start to gather outside the home of Simon Peter where Jesus of Nazareth is spending the day. They are bringing their sick. Their little babies, their crippled ones, the ones with frightening symptoms no one understands, their old ones. They came now because Sabbath is over and they are allowed to bear burdens. Their sick have to be carried and pulled and dragged and held up. And besides, it is cooler now with the sun setting. Perhaps they came because they had already heard about how he had healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of her fever; the one who had been sick so long was in the kitchen again, preparing dinner for her guests. And perhaps they came because they knew the book; they knew about a God who forgives iniquities and heals diseases, knew that lovely image of the great God of Israel, Yahweh, as a great mother hen, under whose wings they would be safe.

And so he had come outside, too, into the cool of the early evening and he talked to them — and listened to them and heard about their symptoms and their fears and worries. He had, I believe, taken them seriously and he had done little more than that actually, except one very important thing: he had touched them, laid his hands on them. Luke says the result was that he cured them.

I don't know of what. Nobody took pictures, but the sense of it is not crutches being thrown away, and screaming and shouting. The sense of it is a quiet moment, when frightened, anxious, oftentimes isolated, lonely, desperate people were touched by a human hand that conveyed something of the love and presence of God.

New Testament scholarship sometimes differentiates between curing a disease, an organic malfunction, and healing an illness, which is the socially isolating personal experience of having a disease. I don't know about that. I do know that sickness is isolating and that there is no aloneness in the world like severe pain and critical illness and the real sense of death's nearness.

The *New York Times* reported a recent study that demonstrated a strong "health advantage among people of faith ... not mystically, but relationally, apparently." It appears there is something life-protective in belonging to a group. [2/4/95] The recent *Newsweek* feature article on stress and exhaustion agrees, and cites research which indicates that "loneliness and social isolation are dangerous to your health — that intimacy promotes health." [3/6/95]

Jesus laid his hands on them. He reached across the chasm their own culture imposed on the sick, inferring that there was something morally wrong with them, reached across the universal chasm of isolation which pain and sickness and the fear of death create, he walked among them and talked and listened and touched them and they were healed.

> "Death," Norman Cousins wrote "is not the ultimate tragedy of life. The ultimate tragedy is depersonalization — dying in an alien and sterile arena, separated from the spiritual nourishment that comes from being able to reach out to a loving hand." [p. 133, *Anatomy of an Illness*]

That is a little of what must have happened that day in Capernaum as the Sabbath sun was setting and the people were bringing their sick to him.

Sooner or later you and I encounter serious illness: the illness of our parents, spouses, friends, our own.

Our religion tells us about a God who loves us as a mother loves the baby nursing at her breast, as a father loves his child, his own flesh and blood.

Our religion tells us about a God who weeps when any of his creatures weeps; who laughs and rejoices when any of her children laugh and rejoice; a God who dwells among and with us, on good days and bad days, in health and also in sickness.

This Christian faith of ours proclaims a Lord who loved and cared for and touched the sick and who, himself — and this is the priceless miracle of it all — became vulnerable, took our humanity upon himself, our frailty, the fragility of our humanity, who died for us — with us, actually, as one of us, as we must die — and rose again, forever demonstrating the power of God's love over everything that can harm us.

John Carmody, who did die of the disease about which he wrote so powerfully, ended his book, poetically:

> "Jesus Christ is the morning star, and the champion who rises out of heaven. He has slain death, crushed the prior strong man and retaken the house made of dawn. He is more than any poetry, least of all mine. So, I find myself saying, 'Marantha' (come Lord Jesus) I murmur in good times and in bad ... Come God my death." [Thomas Long, *Theology Today*, 1/95, an editorial, "Waiting for the Morning Star," p. 491]

Sooner or later we encounter serious illness. May we, on that day, trust him; the one who promises to shelter us under her wings, to hold us in his arms ... the one who has lived and died and risen again — for us, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

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Eternal God, we thank you that we can come to you with our fears, in our pain, in our loneliness because in Jesus Christ you have come to us. We thank you that when he walked among the sick and talked to them and laid his hands on them he was showing us something of your intimate love and close presence. We thank you that in him you have given us peace and the courage to live fully, every day of our lives. We thank you, dear God, for him — our Savior, our healing Christ. Amen.